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SUBJECT: BACK IN THE USSR? TAJIKISTAN'S SECURITY WONKS UNDECIDED

CLASSIFIED BY: Thomas Armbruster, Charge d Affaires, US Embassy
Dushanbe, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b)

11. (SBU) Tajikistan understands the economic and security benefits of globalization, but Russia remains Central Asia's most important global partner. These two themes dominated the papers at a conference on "Globalization: National Interests and National Security for Central Asian Countries" sponsored by the Russian-Tajiki (Slavonic) University in Dushanbe December 122.

12. (SBU) Many speakers' key points mirrored U.S. policy in Tajikistan: narcotics trafficking remains the scourge of Central Asia and threatens regional stability; hydropower has enormous potential to link Tajikistan and its neighbors; China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India could all be potential trading partners; the war on terror has demonstrated that every country-even the United States-must be vigilant in its national security efforts.

13. (SBU) In the opening remarks, Deputy Foreign Minister Nasredinov called social-economic security a top priority and noted drug trafficking and poverty impeded economic development. Hydro energy projects with Russia, Iran, Pakistan and China were vital to Tajikistan's growth. Only a few papers resorted to Soviet-style propaganda, blaming the United States for globalization, or cautioning against Western involvement in the region.

14. (C) Although the Russian Ambassador was slated to speak second, DCM Svetlichniy represented him, as has become the norm at public events in Dushanbe. Svetlichniy noted that Russia had underestimated the importance of Central Asia in the 1990s but was now trying to strengthen its ties to the region. He acknowledged the United States, China and the EU had strategic interests in Central Asia. He suggested Russia and CIS states should follow the American NGO model but create their own NGOs to "better address" the specific problems of the former Soviet Union.

15. (SBU) PolOff's remarks highlighted how Tajikistan already benefits from globalization in everyday life, from cell phones and product choices to fast money wire transfers from Tajik workers in Russia. She underscored that Tajiks should not fear the openness that comes from global trade and communication and cautioned that the only way Tajikistan would attract foreign investment-a theme highlighted by the Foreign Minister and others-is to ensure a transparent investment climate.

16. (SBU) Other speakers represented various Tajik ministries and academic institutions, as well as the Russian and U.S. Embassies. At least eight Russian diplomats dutifully attended, as did the Uzbek Ambassador, and representatives of the Afghan and Iranian Embassies. When the German Ambassador left after the third paper and the Turkish Ambassador failed to show, PolOff was the sole Westerner, left to defend everything from the Nizhniy Pyanj bridge to the "threat" of the English language and the Internet to Tajikistan's security. PolOff's speech garnered the most responses and questions, some predictably accusatory ("Globalization means Americanization!") but many sincere.

17. (SBU) While a number of papers highlighted the United States' role in Central Asia, noting the U.S.-financed bridge construction on the Tajik-Afghan border at Nizhniy Pyanj would open up trade possibilities, the "special relationship" with Russia appeared in almost every paper and question. Tajikistan's need to balance its historic ties to Russia with new global and regional challenges remained a key and unresolved issue, and many speakers cautioned Tajik decisions makers from too hastily departing from these historical ties.

18. (C) COMMENT: The Russian DCM's pitch for Russian NGOs was a sly and sophisticated proposal, potentially to sideline American and Western activities in the region. During the coffee break, Svetlichniy told PolOff he was pleasantly surprised by the quality and thoughtfulness of the papers.

19. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: This conference was an unusually frank and open discussion of Tajikistan's needs and future. The presence of at such a large Russian delegation sent a message that the Russians pay attention to Tajikistan on high and low levels. At the same time, most of the discussion was not neo-Soviet, but a serious conversation about how Tajikistan

should balance its interests to benefit from the global economic forces. Russia's undeniable influence was felt, but there was little urging to return to the past dependency.
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